Culture | The old college try

Does more education lead to less sex?

Trying to make sense of the sexual "degree divide" in America

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free-for-all. In “The Sex Lives of College Girls”, a TV show created by Mindy Kaling, a comedian, which just concluded its third season, sexual escapades are as common as beer kegs. In reality, however, the sex lives of American university students are surprisingly tame. In 2024 one in five seniors at Harvard revealed to the *Crimson*, a student newspaper, that they had never had sex.

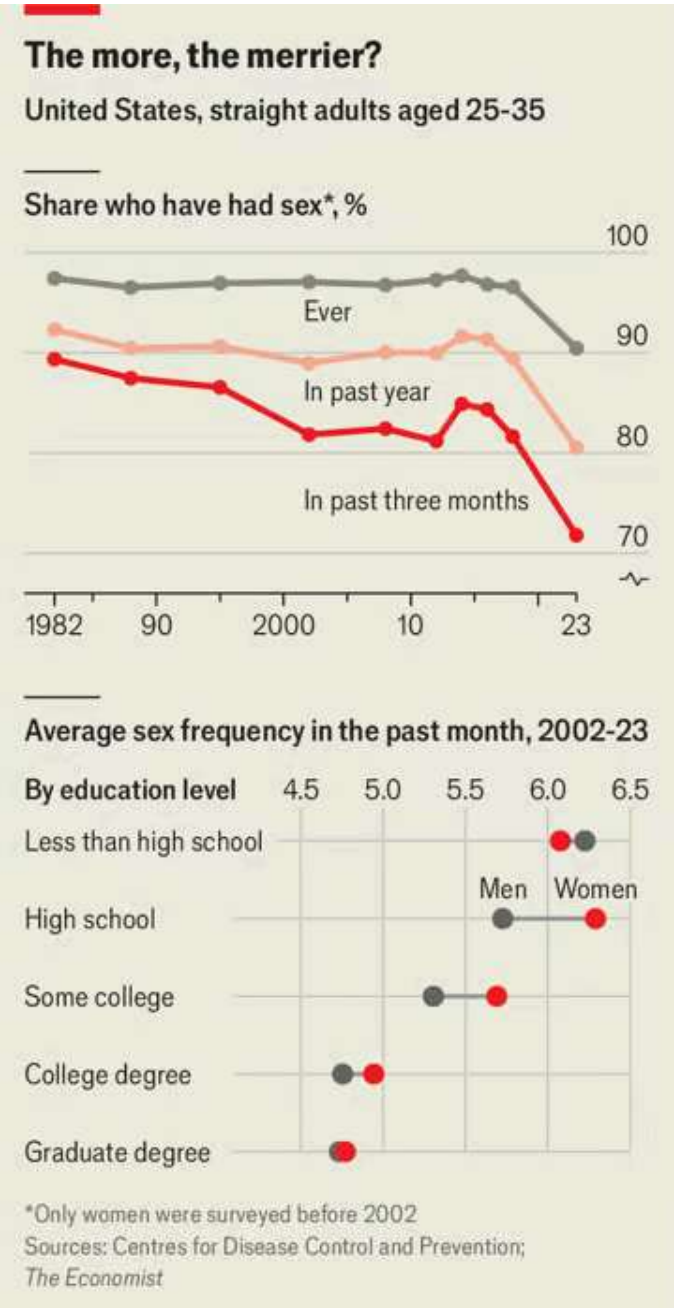

CHART: THE ECONOMIST

This is not unusual. Sexual activity among college-aged Americans has dropped by nearly half in the past 20 years, part of a broader decline in sexual activity that some journalists have dubbed a “sex recession” (see chart).

An analysis by *The Economist* suggests that a sexual slowdown is affecting not just university students but graduates, too. This is creating a “degree divide” in the bedroom. Between 2002 and 2023, 25- to 35-year-olds with a bachelor’s degree had sex 11% less often than the average adult; those with a graduate degree had sex 13% less frequently (see chart). A regression analysis of data from the National Survey of Family Growth, a survey of nearly 10,000 Americans conducted by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, suggests that, even after controlling for age, drinking habits, employment, health and marriage status, a university degree is associated with 7-8% less frequent sex, on average.

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degree holders are six percentage points less likely to say they had sex in the past year. This trend also holds true in Britain but not in Ireland, a country with more robust hanky-panky among the educated.

Little research has been done to answer conclusively why educated Americans would be having less frequent fun in the bedroom. The most popular theories for why people are having less sex in general, from technological distractions to young adults delaying moving out of their parents' house, fail to explain the inactivity among university graduates specifically. Young people are marrying later and less often, and there is no doubt that this is leading to less lovemaking (married couples do it around twice as often as single people). But those with degrees marry at higher rates than those without; their marriages last longer, too.

Screen time is associated with lower sex rates. But graduates do not stream or play video games more often than the rest of the population; in fact, they do so less often. Americans may be reporting higher rates of depression and anxiety than previous decades—which can lead to lower libido—but higher education is associated with better mental health, not worse.

So what could be going on? Perhaps the most obvious theory is that well-educated people work more, on average, and therefore have less free time. "Certainly a percentage of people with college degrees just seem busier with professional pursuits than sex," says Nicholas Wolfinger, a sociologist at the University of Utah. This degree-donning group also spends more time taking care of children, on average. Add in streaming platforms—"more Netflix, less chill", as Lyman Stone, a senior fellow at the Institute for Family Studies puts it—and educated professionals have very little time left for romance.

Another theory holds that better-educated women face a smaller pool of eligible suitors, which may make it harder for them to find a mate (and mate regularly). "We have this situation where women perform better in education, and in some settings, they have better jobs, more money, which leads to a scarcity of suitable men, making it harder for people to match," says Peter Ueda of the Karolinska Institute, a medical university in Sweden. Magdalene Taylor, a sex and culture writer, argues that college graduates, who marry later, may also be better at

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Meanwhile other experts posit that some traits that contribute to excellent academic performance in the classroom may lead to worse performance in the bedroom (sorry, bookworms). “There’s certainly no question young adults who are more focused on education, career and their long term success are more risk averse, more careful, and that seems to be expressed as having less sex,” says Brad Wilcox, a sociologist at the University of Virginia. Those skilled at spreadsheets may still have a lot to learn in the bed sheets. ■

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